

Minerva

The home advantage in football matches is an unorthodox subject for a letter to the *Lancet* (1999;353:1416) but it probably attracted more readers than the whole of the rest of the journal. Two sports scientists from Liverpool reported a small study showing that the roar of the crowd influences the referee's decision in favour of the home team. Observers judging video clips of play were more likely to award a foul against the away player if the crowd noise was on in the background. The effect disappeared when the crowd noise was turned off.

A randomised trial of laparoscopic Nissen fundoplication finds, once again, that laparoscopic surgery takes a little longer than open surgery but causes less pain and disruption to patients' lives (*Journal of the American College of Surgery* 1999;188:368-76). This report also shows that laparoscopic surgery can be cheaper. Hospital costs for both techniques were comparable between groups—about \$3000—but overall costs were substantially lower in the laparoscopic group because patients returned to work more than three weeks earlier than controls.

Cisapride is supposed to speed up sluggish gastric emptying and reduce gastro-oesophageal reflux, but a rare randomised crossover trial in 10 preterm infants suggests that it doesn't work—and may even delay gastric emptying in this age group (*Archives of Diseases in Childhood Fetal and Neonatal Edition* 1999;80:F174-7). The drug is increasingly used in preterm infants, and the authors urge paediatricians to abandon the practice until better evidence on safety and efficacy is available. The Medicines Control Agency says cisapride should not be used in children under 12 years old.

Scientists identified the genetic defect responsible for familial adenomatous polyposis in 1991 and soon afterwards doctors at Mount Sinai Hospital, Toronto, began screening first degree relatives of patients for the mutation. They report in *Gut* that this approach has fiscal benefits, as well as saving unaffected individuals the discomfort of a colonoscopy every few years (1999;44:698-703). Traditional clinical surveillance costs about \$8000 for each family, they say, compared to about \$5000 for genetic testing followed by targeted surveillance. Critically, however, the savings are wiped out if people with the mutation are screened annually instead of every two to three years, as is traditional.

The intriguing but weak link between low birth weight and asthma in adults has been strengthened by an analysis of data from the

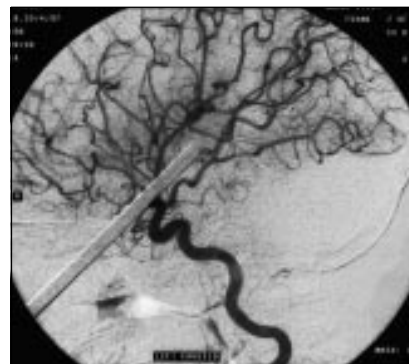
1970 British cohort study (*Thorax* 1999;54:396-402). It shows that the prevalence of asthma in 26 year old men and women falls with increasing weight at birth. This may be because small babies are somehow more prone to allergy later in life or, more likely according to the authors, because small airways at birth lead to small airways in adulthood. Being a fat adult was also independently associated with self reported asthma, particularly in women.

Exercise protects against sudden cardiac death, but what kind of activity counts as exercise and how vigorously should we be doing it? A walk in the park for an hour each week or an hour of mowing, raking, or weeding in the garden are enough to give substantial protection, according to a case control study in *Annals of Internal Medicine* (1999;159:686-90). A word of warning, however: walking in this study means walking for exercise, not for pleasure, so wear Lycra shorts and a ludicrously expensive pair of training shoes just to make sure.

The jury is still out on the existence and whereabouts of the "gay gene" after a team of scientists from Canada and the United States failed to connect male homosexuality with Xq28, the chromosomal segment that began the controversy six years ago (*Science* 1999;284:665-6). In a study of 52 sibling pairs they found that gay brothers were no more likely to share Xq28 markers than would have occurred by chance, and they are now looking elsewhere in the genome for the genetic basis of sexual orientation. The real question is, what are they going to do with it when and if they find it?

Eight young Aboriginal sportsmen have died suddenly of cardiac ischaemia during or just after football matches in the Northern Territory of Australia since 1982 (*Medical Journal of Australia* 1999;170:425-8). This is a death rate 40 times higher than in a comparable population of footballers in Victoria. All the deaths occurred in the wet season, and usually well in to the match, suggesting that soaring temperatures, high humidity, and vigorous exercise all played a part. At least one Northern Territory league has now applied for funding to launch a cardiac screening programme for players and to buy a set of floodlights for cooler late evening matches.

Nutritional supplements like amino acids, n-3 essential fatty acids, and RNA may have immunological and metabolic effects, but evidence of clinical benefit has so far been elusive. A recent meta-analysis of 11 randomised trials, however, shows that



A 17 month old child fell on to the blunt metal leg of a hi fi stand, impaling himself through the right orbit. On presentation he was unconscious but responding to painful stimuli. He was intubated and ventilated. Computed tomography showed that the metal stand had crossed the midline and penetrated the left basal ganglia, although there was no acute bleeding. Cerebral angiography confirmed that there was no vascular damage. The stand was removed uneventfully and the child recovered well apart from a mild right hemiparesis, which is improving.

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adding key nutrients to enteral feeds can reduce rates of infection and length of hospital stay in critically ill patients (*Annals of Surgery* 1999;229:467-77). The investigators analysed data on a mixed bag of nutritional supplements given to patients with a variety of diseases, so it's still unclear which supplements work for which patients. Once again, there's plenty of room for bigger, better trials in well defined groups of patients.

Minerva spent a lot of time as a junior doctor ritually swabbing the skin with alcohol before taking blood. She probably shouldn't have bothered: surgeons from the UK found, in a randomised trial, that swabbing the skin made no difference to rates of infection at the venepuncture site (*Annals of the Royal College of Surgeons of England* 1999;81:183-6). Worse, swabbing the skin can transform a harmless pinprick into a nasty sting for the patient, and only one of the doctors and students surveyed reported leaving the alcohol to dry before wading in with the needle.